

THE UNITY MURAL: BRIDGING COMMUNITIES THROUGH ARTMAKING

“It came down to our deep and persistent belief that when artists work with and in a community, they not only are elemental in transforming the community, but the community is elemental in transforming the artists as well.”

Margaret A. Walker
University of Maryland, College Park

ABSTRACT

A visual essay of a community-based art education mural between two universities and a local community, following a tragic hate crime.

KEYWORDS

Community-based art education,
collaborate and create, community

To correspond with the author regarding this article:
mwalker8@umd.edu

“...it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth.” ~Audre Lorde

In May of 2017, just a few days before graduation, the campuses of the University of Maryland and Bowie State University awoke to shocking news: an African American BSU student had been stabbed to death by a white UMD student in an unprovoked racial attack on UMD's College Park campus. Though much of the campus was horrified that such an attack could “happen here,” others in the community, who had been warning of the increase in racially motivated threats and incidents on campus and in the region—particularly since the fall 2016 elections—were less astonished. This tragic event alerted the administration, faculty, staff, and surrounding community to the difficult and deliberate work that needed to be done to bridge the divides in our community, to disrupt the influence of fear-mongers and racists, and to open the lines of communication and dialogue within the community of the University of Maryland system of colleges and universities.

As a faculty member in the art education program at UMD, and a practitioner of community-based art education, I spent the summer months reviewing and reworking course syllabi to explicitly address racism—in particular, ways in which art teachers may reduce the instances of bigotry and discrimination through engaging in culturally responsive teaching and a commitment to social justice (Borrero, Ziauddin, & Ahn, 2018). Gina Lewis, an art professor at BSU (an Historically Black College/University), Quint Gregory, the director of the Michelle Smith Collaboratory for Visual Culture at UMD, and I spoke at length before the semester began about collaborating on a visual response that would communicate the pain we were feeling, address the deep racial tension we have witnessed, promote the underlying belief that we are one connected university family, express sensitivity toward the victim's family, and ensure a lasting impact on our students, many of whom would be teachers in a few years. Professor Lewis and I settled on a collaborative community mural, to be designed by our students but painted together with the wider BSU and UMD communities.

Why did we choose to work with the community, when it would have been much simpler to allow our artist students to complete the mural on their own? It came down to our deep and persistent belief that when artists work with and in a community, they not only are elemental in transforming the community, but the community is elemental in transforming the artists as well. Working with community validates diversity and contextualism by including a greater variety of disparate voices in the art making experience (Keifer-Boyd, 2000; Daniel & Drew, 2011), and thus promotes social justice education (Garber, 2004; Ulbricht, 2005). When participants in a community-based art project work together, they often recognize similarities where before there were divides, and empathy where before there were misunderstandings (Haedicke, 2016). When applying their learning to an outside project, students come to recognize that their school-learning is connected to, not separate from, their lives outside of school (Lawton, 2014, p. 422). And finally, we chose to work with the community to facilitate social growth and personal transformation. "Through community outreach, students may become empowered and more socially and politically aware. They learn to look outward, beyond their life as members of a family and students in a school to life as citizens of a community and a world in which their voice and actions may be both

personally and socially transformative" (Lawton, 2010, p. 8). These are the qualities I believe are essential in teachers today if we are going to address the divides that are disrupting our society.

The fall semester opened with the mural project, designed by my UMD undergraduate art education students and BSU art students in Professor Lewis's Public Art course. We had three weeks to plan and design the 5' x 16' mural, which would be painted by the community during an art festival on our campus in late September. BSU is located 12 miles from our College Park campus, so in order to make the most of our time, the students met via Skype and social media groups to choose themes, images, quotes, and compositions that they thought would best represent our determination to work toward 'Unity,' both between our campuses and between groups in our society. Our classes then met together on UMD's campus to sketch the design onto the canvases and then, for 12 hours over two evenings during the NextNow Fest, we opened the doors to the community to come together and paint, side by side—BSU and UMD students and visitors, administrators, faculty and staff, young and old, from various cultural backgrounds, and with various experiences making art. Everyone who stepped into the room, even those initially "just looking," was moved to add their personal touch to the representation of Unity that was emerging on the canvas.

The power of true community-based art lies in its ability to transform. It moves each participant to take on the vantage point of another, and thus to step into a space of discomfort, while knowing that they are supported and not being judged, where they can take risks and open up to new ideas and experiences, and thus to grow and see the world anew.

To take a stranger's vantage point on everyday reality is to look inquiringly and wonderingly on the world in which one lives. It is like returning home from a long stay in some other place. The homecomer notices details and patterns in his environment he never saw before. He finds that he has to think about local rituals and customs to make sense of them once more. For a time, he feels quite separate from the person who is wholly at home in his ingroup and takes the familiar world for granted.... Now, looking through new eyes, he cannot take the cultural pattern for granted. It may seem arbitrary to him or incoherent or deficient in some way. To make it meaningful again, he must interpret and reorder what he sees in the light of his changed experience...The formerly unquestioned has become questionable; the submerged has become visible. (Greene, 1988, pp. 267-268)

Through this communal art-making process, the inter-connectedness between each of us is revealed. In these moments, bonds are formed, biases are erased, misconceptions of others fall by the wayside. In these moments, transformation can occur, and healing can begin.

The following quotes are reflections from UMD art education students:

On collaboration:

“The process and execution of collaborating with Bowie State University to create a community-based art mural which exemplifies unity and peace was engaging, thought provoking, and enjoyable... The open-mindedness to changing and adapting ideas allows us to work more creatively and intuitively. It was amazing to see each person contribute towards building this image on the mural, to see these great expanses of white canvas become an image that all of us worked together towards...The arts are essential to our humanity as they inspire us by fostering goodness and creativity. It brings us together regardless of age, religion, or race. The world is a painful place right now, but art allows a place for healing in tough times.” (Kari, personal communication, 09/28/2017)

On transformation

“I was excited about the prospect of making something truly meaningful and relevant, especially in this time of deafening racial tension. I knew that the project we were about to begin would inspire us artistically, but I didn’t realize that I would be inspired to be an activist as well. More than just creating art, we would be cultivating a statement, one that needed to be heard...” (Isabelle, personal communication, 09/28/2017)

On making connections

“Our first face-to-face meeting with the BSU students was a little tentative at first, but as we began to sketch our ideas onto the four panels, I became fast friends with not only the BSU students but with the other students in our class. We were working so hard to portray unity through our art, but our most successful portrayal was in how well we worked together.” (Abbey, personal communication, 09/28/2017)

On learning from others

“Collaborative projects ... require a level of respect for others’ opinions that you don’t necessarily have to consider when working on a project independently...they can be very impactful, and the collaborative aspect gives the project a whole deeper level of impact. They bring to light issues that might not otherwise be addressed.” (Emily, personal communication, 09/28/2017)

On building community

“It was very inspiring, seeing people come together to work on the mural... The mural was meant to bring hope to people, to inspire them, and to bring them together. I think that is a very important aspect of community-based art... Being a part of this project, not only with my classmates but also the BSU students and the community itself, showed me that art can truly unite people... I was amazed at the amount of people that wanted to come paint with us, and it was inspiring seeing them do it.” (Abbey, personal communication, 09/28/2017)

On taking risks

“I remember many times people would come in and say it looked really cool and when we offered them to join in on the mural, they immediately dismissed the invitation. Their excuse was that it would ruin the painting, since they didn’t think their art would be good. However, I noticed that many of those people actually ended up participating. I wonder if it was the open environment, or because they saw other people painting. Or maybe because their

friends decided to paint and they themselves were encouraged to join as well.” (Noah, personal communication, 09/28/2017)

On looking through new eyes

“As a result of this project, I learned why community-based art making is an important aspect of teaching art. We can work on artworks by ourselves. However, I think working with others makes more precious outcomes. We can hear and share ideas and make a better work by communicating with each other...I think it is very important to know others’ thought and adopt it to my thought.” (Min Ji, personal communication, 09/28/2017)



Figure 1. Korey Richardson, UMD alum and mural advisor, and UMD students in Skype session with BSU

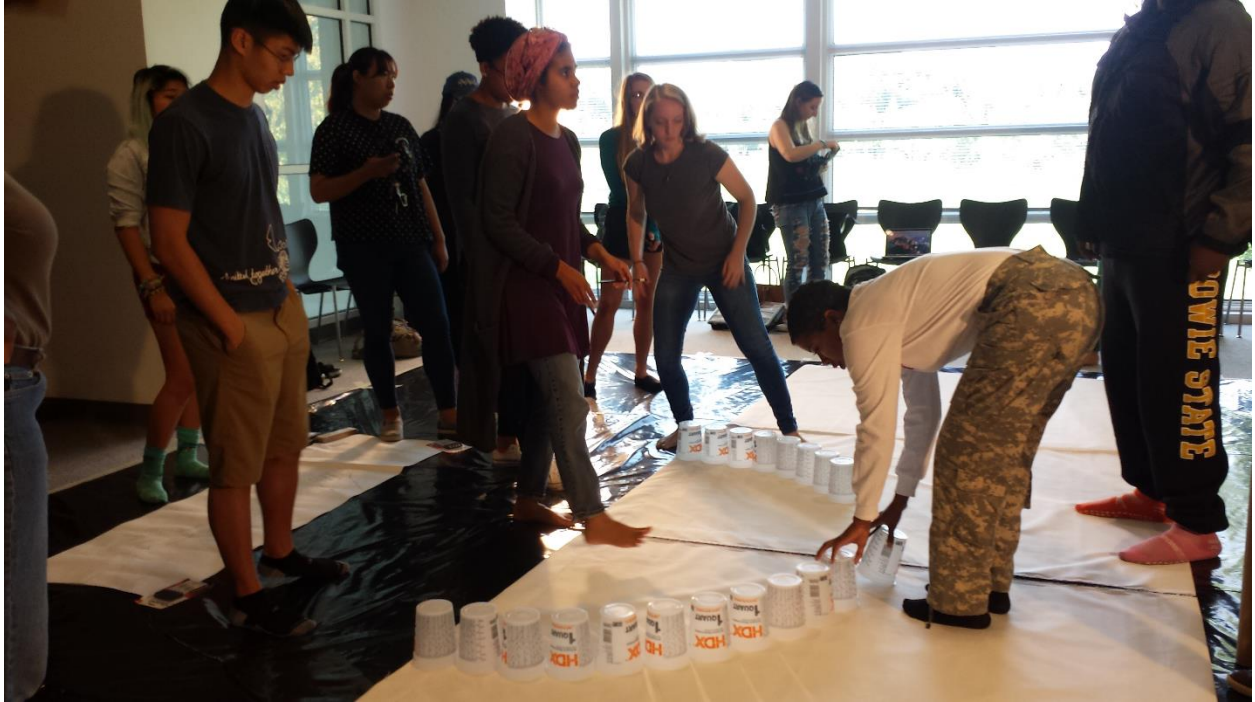


Figure 2. BSU and UMD artists discussing the composition at UMD



Figure 3. BSU and UMD artists sketching out the design on canvas

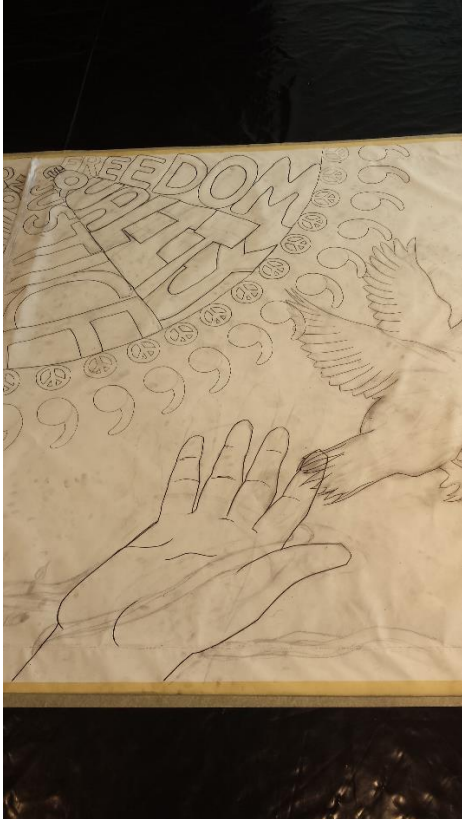


Figure 4 and 4B. The community painting begins



Figure 5 and 5B. Community members painting at the art festival



Figure 6. Second night of painting – the mural is coming together



Figure 7. Mural at the Maryland House of Delegates in Annapolis, MD 2018



Figure 8. BSU and UMD students with finished piece at BSU art studio building

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